

# Canon of Scripture

## Lesson 2

### I. THE WORD 'CANON'

- a. The word 'canon' has a simple meaning. It means the list of books contained in scripture, the list of books **recognized** as worthy to be included in the sacred writings of a worshipping community.
- b. In a Christian context, it means 'the list of the writings acknowledged by the Church as documents of the divine revelation.' In this sense the word appears to have been first used by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in a letter circulated in **AD 367**.
- c. The word 'canon' in the Greek, meant a straight rod used as a **rule**; from this usage comes the other meaning which the word commonly carries in English—'rule' or 'standard'.
- d. This straight rod used was marked in units of length (like a ruler marked in inches); from this practice the word came to be used of the **series** of such marks, and hence it is now used in the general sense of 'series' or 'list'.
- e. It was used also used in another sense to mean 'the rule of faith' or 'the rule of truth' and reflected what the **Apostles** believed and taught. What Apostles taught was the standard for any interpretation of epistles received and, later, biblical writings.
- f. When the accepted list of Holy Scripture was generally agreed upon, Scripture itself came to be regarded as the rule of faith. Thomas **Aquinas** (c 1225 A.D. - 1274 A.D.) says that '*canonical scripture alone is the rule of faith*'.
- g. The questions we are about to answer in this series is: how did certain documents and these only, come to receive this recognition? Who, if anyone, decided that these, and no others, should be on the list of the Holy Scriptures, and what were the **criteria** which influenced this decision?

### II. PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

- a. Many religions have sacred books associated with their traditions or their worship. Specifically, Jews, Christians and Muslims have come to be known as '**people** of the book' in a special sense.
- b. This is a designation given repeatedly in the Quran to Jews and Christians. Among 'people of the book' the 'book' has a regulatory function: conformity to what the book prescribes is a major test of **loyalty** to one's religious faith and practice.
- c. For **Jews**, the 'book' is the Hebrew Bible, comprising the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (from the initials of these three divisions in Hebrew the Bible is often referred to among Jews as the TeNaKh).
- d. For **Christians** the Book consists of the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament, together with the New Testament.
- e. Muslims recognize the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian New Testament, as earlier revelations of God, but these are **subordinate** to the revelation given through the Prophet Mohammad in the Quran.

### III. THE TWO TESTAMENTS

- a. The word 'testament' in English normally means a will (someone's 'last will and testament'); but this is only a **partial** sense in which "testament" is used of the two parts of the Christian Bible.
- b. The Latin word as translated from the Greek word (diatheke) is used to mean various kinds of settlements or **agreements**, which are made between parties. The superior in power or dignity confers certain privileges on an inferior, while the inferior commits to certain obligations towards the superior.
- c. This is usually rendered by our word '**covenant**', and in a biblical context its most distinctive usage relates to an agreement between God and human beings.
- d. In the earliest books of the Old Testament **God** makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants (Gen 9:8-17), and again with Abraham and his descendants (Gen 15:18; 17:1-4).
- e. Later, when Abraham's descendants had migrated to Egypt and were forced into labor, God **acted** upon his covenant with Abraham and brought about their deliverance from Egypt.
- f. Under the leadership of Moses, they were constituted a nation. Their national constitution took the form of a covenant under which the God of their fathers entered with them, making Himself **known** to them by his name Yahweh.
- g. The terms of this covenant were, 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people.' Yahweh covenanted to make provision for them; they covenanted to worship him exclusively and to **obey** his commandments.
- h. These undertakings were recorded in a document called 'the **book** of the covenant'. *Ex 24:4-7 And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basons; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. KJV*

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- i. This narrative is also summarized in the New Testament, where the covenant thus **ratified** is qualified as ‘the first covenant’. *Heb 9:18-20 Whereupon neither the first testament was dedicated without blood. For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people, Saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you. KJV*
- j. This covenant is set in **contrast** with the ‘new covenant’ promised in Jeremiah. *Jer 31:31-34 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. KJV*
- k. Over **six hundred** years after the ratification of the covenant with Moses’, Jeremiah announced that, in days to come, the God of Israel would establish a new covenant with his people to replace that which he had made with the Exodus generation.
- l. That first covenant made the divine will plain to the Jews, but did not impart the **power** to carry it out; and, for lack of that power they broke the covenant.
- m. Under the new covenant, however, not only the desire but also the power to do the will of God would be imparted to his people: his law would be **put** within them and written on their hearts. *‘Phil 2:13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. KJV*
- n. The new covenant was established, and ratified not by the blood of sacrificed animals but by the blood of **Christ**, a sacrifice which effects not merely external purification from ritual defilement but the inward cleansing of the conscience from guilt.
- o. This interpretation of the promise of the new covenant is precisely **aligned** with Jesus's own words. *Mark 14:24 And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many. KJV*
- p. The covenant associated with the blood of Jesus (his voluntary offering himself up to God) is what Jeremiah referred to as a new covenant. **Paul** also declares the new covenant which was related to him by Christ. *1 Cor 11:25 This cup is the new covenant in my blood’*
- q. Each of these covenants gave rise to a special **collection** of literature, and these bodies of literature came to be known in the Christian church as ‘the books of the ancient covenant’ and ‘the books of the new covenant’.
- r. This collection of manuscripts was written **within** one century from the establishment of the new covenant and is regarded as the foundation documents of Christianity: The New Testament.
- s. It was not until the end of the **second** century AD that the two collections (Old & New) began to be described, briefly, as the Old Covenant (or Testament) and the New Covenant (or Testament).
- t. These descriptive **titles** were recorded in both Greek and Latin almost simultaneously—in Greek, they show up in the works of Clement of Alexandria; and in Latin, they are seen in the works of Tertullian of Carthage.

#### IV. A CLOSED CANON

- a. Orthodox Christianity has long ago decided and declared that the Canon of Scripture is **closed** based on the warnings of both the Old and New Testaments. *Deut 4:2 Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. KJV Rev 22:18-19 If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. KJV*
- b. Even so, there are still some who persist in the search for the yet undiscovered manuscripts that will **“add to our understanding of the Word of God”**. Such seekers seem to **discount** the fact that God has a keen interest in preserving and protecting His own word. *Ps 12:6-7 The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever. KJV*
- c. The author of the **Didache** (an early manual of church order) also echoes the warning of Deuteronomy when he says, ‘You shall not forsake the commandments of the Lord, but you shall keep the things you received, “neither adding nor taking away”’.
- d. To those of us who take seriously these clear warnings, such a search for undiscovered manuscripts is futile and certainly could **not** lead us any closer to the TRUTH of God; the Truth that we already hold in our hands.

#### V. APPLICATION

- a. Why do you think that so many people are still hoping to come up with some new-found manuscripts that should be added to the Bible? What evidence supports the idea of a closed canon of Scripture?
- b. Have you covenanted with God to worship Him only and to obey His commandments? How are you doing in keeping your covenant?
- c. If you are numbered among the “people of the Book” how is that evidenced in your daily life?
- d. What, if anything, do you need to do to recommit yourself to being a “*person of the Book*”?